AMERICA'S CUP 1987 : Status of Conner Trial Boat Crew Is Mushrooming

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FREMANTLE, Australia — The voice of Peter Isler, Stars & Stripes '87 navigator, comes over the hand-held radio to Stars & Stripes '85.

"Go for it," Isler orders.

Translated: raise your headsail and we'll start sailing.

Then: "Stand by."

"That was one of the quickest changes of plans ever," says Malin Burnham, aboard S&S; '85.

John (Rambo) Grant calls back from his grinder's position amidships: "Ah, Malin, after you've been on the mushroom boat a while you'll get used to it."

And what is the mushroom boat? It started while the team was training in Hawaii, after Dennis Conner took delivery of '87 and turned '85 over to veteran helmsman Jack Sutphen as the trial boat.

Sutphen, who has sailed 10 12-meters in four America's Cup campaigns, says he wasn't always sure of the day's game plan.

"They would say, 'OK, it's light and fluky so we'll do some windward-leeward races for a while,' then they'd change their minds and do something else," Sutphen said. "We never knew.

"One of the crew finally said: 'You know, we live in the dark.' And another guy said,

"So we made the mushroom flag. We're the mushroom crew. And now Australia picked it up on their second boat. We go by and salute each other. It's pretty good. They have an identity. Finally, after all this time, this trial horse crew is willing to have an identity.

"Before, they thought they were like subs for the first boat. Now they're sort of professional about it."

Yes, the crew has its own battle flag, created by crewman Duncan Skinner of Annapolis, Md.: a mushroom on a field of white, proudly flown from the headstay while leaving and returning to the harbor.

S&S; '87 doesn't have a battle flag.

The mushrooms also have a salute: their arms raised overhead, fingertips touching, to form a circle, like a mushroom.

S&S; '87 doesn't have a salute.

The mushrooms' function is to sail against Conner's boat in a straight line while the latter tests different sails or other equipment. Because wind and water conditions are constantly changing, that's the only way to tell how the changes affect the performance of the boat.

"And they change only one thing at a time," Burnham said. "Otherwise, they wouldn't know which change is making the difference."

On this day, Burnham has joined the mushrooms--a change of pace for the president

A reporter also has been invited along to find out what the mushrooms are all about.

"Great," he responded when asked along. "What time?"

"Can't say," said Bruce Deeter, the mastman and boat captain. "Remember, we're the mushrooms."

Everybody on the boat has one or more things to do. Dory Vogel, wife of '87 bowman Scott Vogel, watches over the computer systems and heaves her 115 pounds into the backstay grinder with Burnham.

Skinner trims the mainsail, Grant and Henry Childers are on the grinding winches used for trimming the genoa and spinnaker, John MacCausland and Stew Silvestri are the headsail tailers, tightening the sheets around a winch as the grinders grind, and John Sangmeister, Tom Darling and Greg Isett do all of the sail and spinnaker pole handling forward in the boat.

The reporter's job is to stay out of the way, which allows a chance to observe a 12-meter team at work.

Deeter, who was under the weather Wednesday and did not sail, had said: "There really isn't much difference between the crews. It's just Dennis Conner's thing about scooping up all the talent around."

Burnham says: "Mostly, their crew has more experience, as far as guys that can spot wind on the water and the little things like that."

Conner's crew is down to nine "starters," plus Kyle Smith and Childers, who alternate

alternating mastman until he tore a thigh muscle when he was slammed into a winch by a wave and washed overboard. Grant broke a bone in his foot three weeks ago.

"That's bull about an A crew and a B crew," Grant says. "If the crew of that other boat is the best crew down here, this is certainly the second best in the whole place."

Grant, 43, is the oldest hand in a working position on either crew and certainly not the largest, but he takes his work seriously and concedes an edge to no one, as his nickname suggests. There was a grinder's contest in Fremantle recently, using a simulated machine.

"I beat all those guys," Grant says.

In his mind, he is not sailing on a trial boat, which is often regarded as little more than a sparring partner or a punching bag. He does not feel at all subservient to S&S; '87.

"We try to kick their butts every day," Grant says. "I want to win, like the rest of these guys. Every time you go out on the race course you go out to win, not to play games with somebody else, whether it's your own guys or somebody else.

"This crew is a real good crew. These other guys are great sailors. They could sail for anybody here."

He goes down the list of mushrooms and cites their credentials.

"We've all sailed in the cup races," Grant says. "To think that you're training just to help somebody else, that's not it. You've got the same intensity as when you go out to

they're some kind of second-class citizens. There are no second-class citizens in this program."

Stars & Stripes '85 is trailing a hundred yards behind S&S; '87, which is flying Dolly, the unique, full-breasted spinnaker it borrowed from America II. After several minutes Conner wants to see how the sail looks from a distance, so he has Isler radio over to S&S; '85 to prepare to switch spinnakers.

"We're gonna get Dolly?" a crewman says excitedly.

Cheers all around. Conner has made the mushrooms' day.

"We want to look at it from the front," Isler says.

"Not it," Burnham corrects, " *her* ."

MacCausland, who campaigned a Star boat in the U.S. Olympic trials in '84, says: "We have fun out here. I like sailing, and this is a good way to learn. I came into the program not knowing a lot about big boats."

But it's still competitive, in an oblique sort of way. Nobody wants S&S; '85 to be the better boat, because then the whole development program has failed. But they want the mushrooms to try to be better.

"The way you make them fast is by pushing hard here," Skinner says. "The way they're winning the America's Cup is with boat speed. The way they get boat speed is by sailing against this boat."

and not a failed experimental mode for S&S; '87.

"There are days when we will sail windward-leewards and they cannot get ahead of us," Skinner says. "We feel great about it. It makes everybody sit back and try to figure out how to make that boat better."

Burnham's trained eye tracks S&S; '87 for a few minutes.

"They're not pulling away," he announces quietly.

Dory Vogel, checking S&S; '87's mast height with a sextant at 10-minute intervals, confirms Burnham's calculation.

Then the spinnakers are dropped and exchanged via the inflatable chase boat piloted by Richard Chesebrough. Dolly goes up on '85 and the Kookaburra chase boat is seen approaching off the port quarter.

"You think we ought to keep doing this with the Kookas watching?" Burnham asks.

After a few minutes the sail comes down and the boats turn upwind to test mains and jibs. The wind has piped up past 20 knots, bringing S&S; '87 to life like a young colt galloping free through the whitecaps. The mushrooms slip on their foul weather gear.

A 12-meter is two different breeds. Downwind in a blow, it wanders like a drunken sailor, requiring a deft touch at the helm. Upwind, its rig trimmed like a watch spring and its sails as tight as drumheads, it attacks the waves like Rocky Marciano.

Salt spray is everywhere. Water collects in the low sides of the cockpit as the

When a 12-meter tacks, winch gears grind, cables clatter through sheet blocks and the whole boat seems to protest with mighty groans, all of this amplified through the aluminum hull. A tack on a 12-meter sounds like a train wreck.

Even sailing alongside to weather, the boats groan and scream to the constant trimming of sails. It gets in a guy's blood.

Deeter, 25, of Palmdale, says: "They had resumes from more than 300 people, tried out over 100 and picked 22. It's quite an honor to be here.

"I saw a lot of guys come and go . . . had a lot of different roommates. Dennis made character decisions immediately."

Deeter says a guy can make a living sailing big boats around the world, but not a real good living. "I'm going to work for a stockbrokerage in San Francisco when I leave here," he says. "They're gonna train me. It'll be a big change.

"Most of the guys look at this as an Olympic effort. Olympians aren't there for the money."

But to do it on a backup boat requires special dedication.

"Just because you're on the backup boat doesn't mean you're second-rate or a bunch of ragamuffins," Grant says. "We're only a sprained ankle away from the other boat, and you wouldn't notice any difference.

"The thing about a backup guy in a program like this, you have to train just as hard and be ready to go. We've had people hurt throughout the program, so everybody's

You have your own way of doing things and the tailers you work with, for example, have their way of doing things. You have to come in and not be a hindrance.

"It's supposed to be the same, but in reality it isn't. Each guy that's trimming a sail has a different technique.

"The grinding isn't just turning the handles. The timing is important: when you start and the speed, and when you're all applying the pressure that lets you conserve your energy."

The boats have been out for about five hours when the call comes through from S&S; '87: "Job well done, guys. Let's head for the barn."

Cheers.

"Not too loud, guys," Burnham cautions. "They don't like to see happy mushrooms."